

**Will the small shake-up from the 2004 title team result in another October run or Boston being absent completely from the playoffs?**

**BOSTON™**

**3. Boston Red Sox (95-67):** Nobody saw it coming. The Boston Red Sox winning the 2004 World Series after a 3-0 deficit in the ALCS to the Yankees, then being swept by the Chicago White in the opening round of last year's American League playoffs. Of course, the BoSox were jockeying for playoff positioning all year long a season ago and in some ways were fortunate to get into the postseason. Though, even the demanding die-hard Red Sox fan would admit they can live with a swept since they got their dream to come true in '04. No guarantee that'll be the case for '06. With the Yankees swiping center fielder Johnny Damon from their grasps and the Toronto Blue Jays staying busy this past winter making major moves, it's conceivable they could win the division, finish as low as third or back in the middle [2<sup>nd</sup> place] again. A lot will depend on the health of two pitchers – right-handed starter Curt Schilling, a future Hall-of-Famer with loads of pride, and closer Keith Foulke. Neither could stay healthy last season and Schilling, a capable 20-game winner that has been up for Cy Young consideration time and time again – not to mention the co-MVP of the 2001 World Series – threw out of the bullpen on a number of occasions. Manager Terry Francona has practically an entirely new infield for opening day as well as a new stud pitcher in ex-Florida Marlins World Series MVP Josh Beckett. Don't forget they held on to wacky but productive RBI-machine outfielder Manny Ramirez and David 'Big Papi' Ortiz. The duo makes up one of the best back-to-back combinations in a lineup in baseball history and we don't use that phrase loosely. So things can't be that bad in Beamtown when you have a pair of MVP caliber power hitters on your roster, can they?



**Patient Big Papi has finished in the top five in the American League MVP voting each of the last three seasons and been handsomely paid for his performance.** (Photo Courtesy of ICON SMI)

Boston plans on using a platoon in right field between Trot Nixon and the newly acquired Willy Mo Pena (19HR and 116K), who comes over in trade from Cincinnati in exchange for pitcher Bronson Arroyo. The deal means the Red Sox lose a gutsy arm, but gain another power threat. Another outfielder that'll help cope with the loss of Damon, a fan favorite throughout the city, is Coco Crisp. More so than numbers or fielding, Crisp

brought an energy to the Cleveland Indians that'll be welcomed at Fenway Park, where his stats could see an increase. Management certainly is glad they held on to catcher Jason Varitek because not only does he run the bases well and protect the plate, but continued to put up solid numbers: .281Avg, 22HR, 70RBI and 30 doubles. At shortstop, they bring in their fourth new player in a two and a half year span. Following the well respected former All-Star names of Nomar Garciaparra, Orlando Cabrera and Edgar Renteria are defensive-minded players Alex Gonzalez and Cora. Veteran J.T. Snow will be a nice defensive backup to Kevin Youkilis at first base, while Mark Loretta mans second. If nothing else, Loretta can be a slap hitter on that deadly hitting unit. Taking control of third base will be Mike Lowell, who saw his number take a dip last year and it may be a sign of what's to come.

**Mr. Clutch: Every sport has one. Whether it's Adam Vinatieri in football or Robert Horry in basketball, these type of individuals get the job done at the most pressure-packed moments. Add Boston DH David Ortiz, an often forgotten hitter in his Minnesota playing days, to that list. Ortiz, the man that came through twice for the Red Sox in less than 24 hours during their thrilling, improbable comeback against the Yankees in the 2004 playoffs, hit 20 homers last season that either tied the game or essentially won it for his team. That's coming through in the clutch.**

Joining Schilling and Beckett in the rotation, you have knuckleballer Tim Wakefield and Matt Clement (10-2 before All-Star break). I think Jonathan Papelbon has passed Foulke by as this team's best relief pitcher. Papelbon setup Mike Timlin (7-3, 2.24ERA and 13SV) well by striking out 34 men in 34 innings. Guillermo Mota and Rudy Seanez give them two real fine arms if they adjust to the AL play. For the future, '05 draft pick Craig Hansen from St. John's should be a hard-thrower that lands a permanent and prominent roster spot either in September or undoubtedly some time next season.

**Bottom Line: Both Schilling and Wakefield are getting up there in age. What are the chances of each starting and finishing the season 100% healthy as well as effective? I could see Beckett putting it together and having a Cy Young type season. That said, the lineup isn't quite as potent as it has been in the past so it'll be up to some of the role players and bullpen to keep them in the playoffs.**

**Projected Order: CF Coco Crisp  
2B Mark Loretta  
DH David Ortiz  
LF Manny Ramirez  
RF Trot Nixon/Willy Mo Pena  
C Jason Varitek  
3B Mike Lowell  
1B Kevin Youkilis  
SS Alex Gonzalez**

**Projected Staff: R Curt Schilling  
R Josh Beckett  
R Tim Wakefield  
R Matt Clement  
L David Wells/R Jonathan Papelbon**

*Pick: 3<sup>rd</sup> in the AL East; finish three games back for the Wild Card.*